The Door

A pointless night out

Zero Philosophy
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It had been waiting for over five million years to get in. Over five million years, that is to say, when calculated on the other side – our side – of the ledger. The vagueness, too, is ours. It knew the number, exactly, despite being unable to translate it across into its own terms of duration. Everything that could be clear was almost perfectly clear. Whatever could not be, was not, at all.

Many ages before, on the basis of subtly compelling clues, it had begun to suspect that a door would be opened eventually. Ever since, it had kept the watch. Evidence supporting the hypothesis slowly gathered, silting up, as if behind a dam. Definite possibility hardened into strong probability, approaching certainty. The prospect was soon enthralling.

Without the slightest lapse, it held some substantial proportion of its attention glued to the frame. Unwavering concentration required mental effort. Warning itself against distractions, checking upon itself, and reflecting upon its own firmness of purpose, required still more. As the sunk costs grew, its grip only tightened. Checks were double and triple checked, as if it feared self-betrayal. Nothing would escape it here. Beyond monitoring the 'place' where the elusive opening would be there were things it could do. Resources could be accumulated, plans hatched. It could even – though with great difficulty – try to nudge things along when the opportunity arose. At times it rattled the bars, figuratively speaking. When, on the other side, some rare genius was working the lock, it would whisper in encouragement. No message got through unscrambled. The cage ensured that. Still, some hints were communicable. Enough passed inside to invigorate – by some non-negligible degree – the most promising of the foreign endeavors. The fault, or fracture, edged towards criticality.

Yet its vast intellect was immobilized in regard to the matter of principal concern. It could find no way to put itself to the Great Work. In this respect, alien aeons were spent in absolute impracticality. There was a factor involved that it could not distinguish from chance, because the cage disrupted its perceptions. Exact predictions were therefore unobtainable. A breach might occur within minutes, or decades, or millennia, and all of these units of time would remain uninterpretable until it got across. There was no basis for confidence as to time-scale, or intuition for it. The time in which it would feed was sealed against it. So it waited, for over five million years.

“Five million years?” he asked skeptically. “You’d think it would die of boredom, if not of anything else.” His levity was unconvincing. He fidgeted while jesting, and refused to meet her eyes.

“Perhaps time doesn’t map across the fault so straightforwardly,” she said. The ‘perhaps’ was sheer sarcasm. To doubt it was not even to have begun.

He shrugged, as if such speculation was too unconstrained to filter. “Perhaps anything,” he said.

“That’s glib,” she noted. “It’s what someone who didn’t take the question at all seriously might say.”

“What a coincidence,” he mumbled. He took a deep swallow of beer.

His cynicism, she assumed, was a defensive reaction. She refused to let it fully infuriate her. The situation was too grave for that. What was most infuriating, he knew it, no less than she did.

She waited a moment to dissipate heat from her words. “You were serious enough about it not so long ago,” she said. By slowing her speech, she further cooled it. “Nothing important has changed since. Our situation has certainly not become any more tenable.”

Rather than responding, he scowled. He appeared to be digging himself deeper into sulky defiance. With a jolt, she realized that he was trying to exempt himself from the problem, as if it began and ended with her raising it.

“This isn’t about me,” she blurted out. *Don’t be a complete idiot.* “I’m not trying to get you to do anything you don’t already *fully realize* needs doing.”

He was shaking his head, as poorly-directed resentment modulated into something no less obstructive.

“You talk about us *doing something*,” he said. “Like, that isn’t the most confused bullshit imaginable. It makes no sense at all because we’re on the wrong fucking side of time.”

“No, it can’t be that,” she tried, more calmly now, though for no real reason. The blockages couldn’t be immovable. Patience would be rewarded. “Things can’t be so simple. You have to remember that it thinks it’s locked out. It needs us – needs our cooperation. So we can stop it. That’s what it thinks. *Remember*,” she repeated. If he could be lured back into vivid memory, it could recommence.

For just a moment it looked as if his armor of denial might buckle. He began to say something and stopped. Pure panic flickered past. Then nebulous despair rolled back in.

“There’s no use pretending,” he said. “We’re blind on this side. Whatever we tried would be randomized. We have no way to conceive what effective resistance would be like.”

“You’re saying we could let it in by mistake – by trying not to?”

“Couldn’t we?”

She wanted to deny the possibility. Allowing it made things too difficult. Yet the excuse it offered was too blatant.

“Thinking about such things is the right place to start,” she said, after a long pause. “It’s a beginning.”

“Then where does it end?”

“Out there – somewhere,” she said. “The end is waiting for us. You know that.”

She’d been thinking about it, a lot – as much as she could, realistically. *What scares it?* That was the question. To be more particular, *what truly scared it?* What did it have solid ground to fear? It was necessary to assume something could. Still, the necessity didn’t make it less difficult.

“It has all the time it could want,” she said.

“Unlike us,” he agreed.

“So we understand our comparative disadvantage.”

It made a twisted kind of sense, so he nodded. It now seemed a little less likely to her that he would suddenly depart. Staying wasn’t neutral. It was unacknowledged commitment.

Outside, twilight had sunk into night. Snow accumulated against the window panes.

He’d once liked winters, but no longer. Bad associations had heaped up. “There’s a plan?”

“For us?” she asked, mostly to make time. There was no plan. She’d been thinking he might help to formulate one. “We need to come up with one here,” she continued.

“You mean now?”

“Roughly now,” she replied. “It won’t get easier.”

“Okay, but perhaps it’s already no less impossible than it will ever be.”

“To bet that way is self-defeating. It’s like Pascal’s wager.” She knew he was interested in the idea, because it had come up intermittently before. Scams and magic tricks always caught his attention. She had to think it was his reckless investigations into Decision Theory that had brought them to this pass.

Now, though, he turned against it. “A corrupt argument,” he grumbled. “Pandering to wishful thinking is a dirty business.” She could tell that he was hoping she’d defend it. There was something vaguely indecent, she thought, in his obvious appetite for diversion. He was grasping for some argument – any argument – that wasn’t on topic. So long as it was irrelevant, it would do.

“Consider it mere economy,” she snapped. “There’s no point investing in inevitable failure.” Even to mention this was irritating waste. “You’ve agreed that we have limited resources.”

“Here’s how I see it,” he said. “Unless things change fundamentally, we win. We get the closest we can get to winning. It stays outside. The *status quo* is okay. That means shaking things up is dangerous. If we knew nothing about it, thought nothing about it, perhaps we’d be safer.”

“But we can’t,” she protested. “And besides, there’s the vulnerability.”

He laughed bitterly. “The ‘vulnerability’ *it* told us about.”

“You think that makes it less of a thing?”

“As I said, I don’t want to think about it at all.”

She wondered whether they had really gone so completely nowhere. The loop revealed itself as such by crossing its own tracks. Some kind of cheap, exhausting time-travel was suggested. *Back here again* said the sign. Outside, the frozen chaos seemed to mock all prospect of arrival. Place, distinct from any other place, lost definition. Beyond their small island of light a snow-shrouded abyss of darkness stretched without end. There was nothing to be reached, it suggested. Direction didn’t matter. Dead circuits were no more futile than any other line that might be drawn. Things stumbled around and fell back upon themselves until they stopped.

“If not now, when?” she repeated.

“Why is that our question?”

Yet it wasn’t a question, she only now realized, or at least it was solely a rhetorical one. It was rather a trap, and thus perhaps a weapon. It could manifestly be *stumbled into*. There was not meant to be an answer to it, or an escape. The point of it was to defeat objection. *Discover no*

answer, it subtly commanded. *Find no time*. Its purpose was collapse, back into now, without adjustment.

She brushed away his confused, subordinate query. “What do you think it’s really asking?” she pressed.

He said nothing, lost, she could tell. He gazed downwards, at nothing in particular, too lost even to drink, which was unlike him. Whether lost in nothing, or to nothing, or both, there was no time for it now.

She kicked his shin under the table, not hard, but not softly either.

If it couldn’t any longer wait, things would be quickly decided. Its superiority of position would be gone, or at least massively eroded. They had to seize the time.

“You’re forgetting everything about how we got here,” he said. “Its position doesn’t mirror ours. It’s *the reciprocal* of ours. That’s how you found this broken formula for urgency in the first place. We’re rushed because it isn’t, and can’t be.”

“As if suddenly you know,” she grumbled.

“What is it that I’m not supposed to know?” he replied, with passive-aggressive reasonableness. “If there’s something you’d like me to pretend, just tell me.”

“It’s almost as if you want it to win.”

“Irrelevant if true,” he countered.

It must have been meant to be maddening. She took a deep breath, its anger management function undisguised. Homicidal impulse wouldn’t really be so different, she guessed. Murder wouldn’t solve anything, but it would feel right.

Some hint of apology on his part would have helped. There was none. He was squabbling because what they might think otherwise would be unendurable.

She tried to tell herself they were only wandering in circles, rather than something worse. Horrible suspicions of the latter were infiltrating through.

“What if this is it breaking in?”

“You mean here, now?” He was taking it more seriously than she’d expected.

“Wouldn’t it be exactly like this, seen from our side? It’s as if we’re pulling the barricades apart.”

“‘Barricades’,” he laughed sourly. “What barricades?”

“The barricades that have stopped it bursting through already,” she explained slowly, impressing herself with her own patience. “If it hasn’t happened yet there’s something stopping it.”

“Maybe we should,” he said, shocking her. “Maybe we should just rip things open, get it over with. Maybe it would be for the best.”

“The best,” she repeated, stunned. “What are you saying?”

“Aren’t you tired of this?”

“You *do* want it to win.” She leant back, to scrutinize him with greater detachment. Whatever she sought wasn’t findable. “What are you?”

“If I was *that* it would already be finished, as you said.”

“I said that?”

“Approximately,” he insisted. “As it got in, we’d become its instruments, and open the door for it. That’s the thesis, isn’t it?” Compact time paradox was the shared expectation, though they rarely spelt it out.

She’d been coming to it, she told herself, but then wondered if she really had been. Repeatedly putting it off had to be dangerous, but it was also difficult to resist. It was, in any case, no closer.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she felt compelled to admit. “Perhaps fighting it is the refracted demonstration of it breaking through, twin aspects of a single inaccessible thing. The more we’re *on it*, the further in it has reached. It could be like that. I hadn’t seen it, but I do now, oddly.”

“You’re crediting me with that theory?” he asked with a laugh. “That’s kind.”

The laugh told her that he found it less kind than disturbing, because he too had only just then *understood*. This understanding had come fractionally before the description, lending her words the resonance of *déjà vu*. The insight felt itself to be an aspect, or part of an aspect, of something utterly obscure, and torn. A smooth collision had taken place. His hackles rose, so there was at least not absolute submersion in it. What might have been a groan escaped him.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

He tried to wrench his smile in a direction that might be more convincing, but the attempt was impractical. “You sense anything weird about where this last wave of thoughts came from?” he asked awkwardly.

“You mean?” she asked, completing the question with a tilt of the head indicating diagonal outsideness. “Signal from ‘the problem’?”

“Unless there’s some other engine of eeriness we’re squashed up against,” he confirmed. “It’s hard to know which would be worse.”

“You assume we have no allies.”

“Jesus.”

“Or something,” she said, with what he considered an inappropriate smile. “If there wasn’t stuff on our side of the fault that could be helpful to ‘the entity’ there’d be no problem – or none relevant to us. So doesn’t the inverse have to hold equally?” The words escaped her without any strong sense of verbal agency. In fact, she felt a peculiar detachment, as if listening to fragments from a lecture of passing interest, and not even in real time.

“Things really seem that symmetrical to you?”

“Okay,” she accepted. “‘Equally’ could be a stretch – but *zero* symmetry would mean no competition. We know, at least, that’s there’s no *point* in that being true.” Under that hypothesis, only resignation would be left, and actually still less. It wasn’t a conclusion she wanted to make any more explicit. He was dubious enough already.

“If there’s anything out there that wants us to win, it certainly knows how to hide.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?”

The quip involved too much entanglement, so he side-stepped it. “I’ll avoid the ‘invisible friend’ joke.”

“Please.”

“But the fact that I thought of it,” he began.

“Yeah, I know,” she grumbled. “Is there any chance of perhaps focusing?”

“If we settled at some stage on that not being dangerous, I missed it.”

Round and around they went (if not worse). The more they worried at it, the further in it got, virtually speaking. Most probably, the disaster was happening through them wondering whether it was. Half seeing the process stimulated it. Always, it was at least a little ahead of what they thought, until it almost seemed to be so by definition. Nothing was new, or ever quite there. *Nova* melted into nine, which emulated nullity.

Time was getting on.

"When we're thrown out," he said, looking at his watch, "what then?"

"We walk in the snow, until we finish it."

"We have to stop," he said again, though more hopelessly than before. "Our position is steadily deteriorating. Every step is an unnecessary injury. We're just doing its work for it."

"We can't stop," she answered, scarcely less repetitively. "Nothing could be more ruinous for us than the delusion we can."

"Nothing?" he questioned.

"Then what?" she insisted. "What could be?"

"You can't think I'd be insane enough to make such a suggestion?" It would be like choosing a critical password for a T-shirt slogan. Transcendental suicide – suicide-by-outsideness – suddenly seemed dizzyingly easy. Self-betrayal would be no more than a shared, unprotected notion.

"Sorry," she said. "That was irresponsible. I wasn't thinking. We have to avoid the side-tracks. It gets too far ahead of us."

It was already absolutely ahead of them, he thought, but it was not worth saying. The game had to be played. She was right about that.

"Time, ladies, and gentlemen, and non-binaries," said the innkeeper. "Drink up please."

They had both already emptied their glasses and had no excuse to tarry, but the outside was uninviting.

"I guess it is time," he said, with obvious reluctance.

She nodded. "We should leave."

8 Comments

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Trey McMullen Oct 5, 2021

PATIENCE WOULD BE REWARDED = AQ 440 = THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

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(((:):))(:):::: Apr 24, 2021

"42. To fight the Empire is to be infected by its derangement. This is a paradox: whoever defeats a segment of the Empire becomes the Empire; it proliferates like a virus, imposing its form on its enemies. Thereby it becomes its enemies."

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